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## PROFESSOR CARTER'S LOWELL LECTURES ON THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE ROMANS

The *Classical Journal* is indebted to Mr. S. B. Luce, a member of the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, for a report of the Lowell Lectures, delivered in January by Professor Jesse Benedict Carter, director of the American School of Classical Studies in Rome.

The introductory lectures discussed the religions of the earliest inhabitants of Italy: the animistic worship of the primitive Italic stock, and the new religion introduced by the Etruscans, with its worship of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. The Etruscans united the seven hill-top towns that they found on the site of Rome into one *Urbs*, in which only the Italic and Etruscan gods could be worshiped; within the magic circle of the *Pomerium* no strange gods could be brought.

The first period of the Republic saw the expansion of the Roman influence over Italy, and the coming in of Greek influence from the colonies in the south. The Greek anthropomorphism had given to the gods the forms of men, and the Greeks conceived man's task to be to raise himself to their level. When the Romans took over Greek anthropomorphism they applied it in the opposite manner: they brought the gods down to their own level. The earliest cults were those of Apollo and Aesculapius, and the use of the Sibylline Books, through which the worship of Magna Mater was introduced during the Second Punic War. The Greek cults brought in ritualism with all its attendant evils, and paved the way for the second period of the Republic.

This was a period of great material prosperity; it was marked by the rise of large fortunes, and as investment was practically limited to real estate, the small farmer was crushed out, unable to compete with the large estates of the rich men, cultivated by slave labor. In the meantime Roman religion was faring badly. Great wealth led to self-indulgence, which in turn bred impiety and vice. This was in part compensated by the rise of a sense

of individualism not found before. In this period of dearth of ideals certain men felt a sense of responsibility for the evil conditions, and tried to remedy them; notable examples were Scaevola, with his three distinct religions (that of the statesman, of the philosopher, and of the poet); Varro, with his encyclopaedia of Roman religion; Cicero, with his philosophical writings; and Lucretius, who renounced the old doctrines for his scientific religion of atoms.

Augustus came upon the scene when the Roman world was upset by the turmoil of civil war, and with the problem of reconciling discordant elements thrust upon him. He succeeded through religion. He restored the ancient cults and established their priesthoods on a firm basis; he set up the custom of idealizing Rome, as we see from the phrase "*Roma aeterna*" in the Augustan poets; but his greatest restoration was that of the street-corner worship of the *Lares Compitales*. He disposed of the political clubs formed by such worship by placing between the *Lares* the *Genius Augusti*, thus making these clubs the strongest support of emperor-worship, of which this was the entering wedge. But the emperor was not worshiped during his lifetime, only his *Genius*, that part of him which was divine. Emperor-worship became in time the only cult common to all the Roman world.

The question of salvation by knowledge was taken up by the schools of philosophy. The idea of salvation was pre-Christian, but came from the Orient. Seneca was the principal teacher of this form of religion, but after him came such men as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; but as only certain sorts of knowledge could save souls, these men dispensed with science and turned to philosophy. They promulgated their creeds among the masses, like missionaries. Their method, however, failed, and by the third century another method of salvation had prevailed, salvation by faith, as introduced by the oriental cults.

The appeal that the oriental cults made to the people was through their differences from the national religion. Their priests devoted their whole lives to the worship of their divinity, and did not, like the Roman priests, have political affiliations. Most important of all, they required of their followers acts of devotion,

self-sacrifice, and penance, which satisfied their cravings for a better life. The most beautiful of all these oriental cults was that of Mithras. Unfortunately we know him only from his enemies, the church fathers, and from inscriptions. His cult came to Rome through the Cilician pirates after their defeat by Pompey. Mithras was not the chief god of his cult; he was only the special guardian of Ahura Mazda, the god of Light, who was opposed to Ahriman, the god of Darkness. The militant nature of this cult appealed to the Roman centurions, who were constantly being transferred from one post to another, and carried their worship with them, doing a tremendous amount of proselyting.

The crucial point in the study of Roman religion is the introduction of Christianity. Two difficulties beset the modern student at this point: (1) the tendency to take only a patronizing interest in the oriental cults, as something unreal and imaginary, whereas they were something very real and vital; (2) our very reverence for Christianity, which makes us unable to look at it from an objective point of view, i.e., the point of view of the pagan.

Judea at the time of the beginning of Christianity was a very insignificant part of the Roman world. Its inhabitants were originally semi-barbaric tribes, which went through the process of development of religious conceptions until they reached a pure monotheism. The Romans also ultimately believed in one god, but they were henotheists as opposed to the Hebrew monotheism; for their henotheism was merely quantitative, while the Hebrew conception was qualitative as well as quantitative. Judea was first conquered by the Romans in B.C. 63, when Pompey subdued it, but until B.C. 4 its history is unimportant for Rome. In that year Antony set up Herod the Great, and at this date the history of Christianity began. That Jesus was a historical character there should be no question. The religion of Jesus was first preached to those Jews who were looking for the coming of the Messiah; it was inevitable that they should see in it either the most marvelous thing that had ever happened, or the most blasphemous imposture that had ever been perpetrated. Very soon arose the question whether salvation was for the Jews only, or for the gentiles as well. We may well believe that Paul in answering

this question for all future time was more Roman than Jew, and that he meant Christianity to spread throughout the Roman world. It remained for Augustine to show at length that it was for all the world, even that which was not Roman.

In the early days of Christianity it was impossible for the Roman emperors to distinguish between Christian and Jew. The persecutions of Nero, for instance, were directed against Jew as well as Christian. The Jews were always making trouble by refusing to worship the Roman national gods. In the time of Trajan, however, Christian and Jew were no longer confounded. As a rule the "good emperors" were the ones to persecute the Christians; the more they stood for the enforcement of the laws, the more they came into conflict with these men who refused to worship the national gods, among them the emperor himself. Toward the time of Marcus Aurelius men became more tolerant of other beliefs, and the desire for martyrdom grew stronger among the Christians; as they grew bolder, the period of the Apologists began. Finally under Diocletian there came a period of wholesale persecution. It was slow but systematic, seeking out all classes of people who had embraced the church.

In 323 Constantine became emperor. His character is still a mystery; the eastern church has canonized him, the western church has not, and is probably right. The truth about him seems to be that, while not an irreligious man, he was absolutely devoid of religious feeling. He was above all a great politician, and in order to get the support of the Christians, he embraced their faith, and established it on an equal footing with the other religions. It is quite clear, however, that when he became a Christian he thought he was embracing the cult of Mithras.

That Constantine might learn exactly what he was worshiping, the Council of Nicaea was held. At this time the emperor was not only a Christian, but Pontifex Maximus, or in other words head of the national religion. In order to simplify matters in Rome, he founded Constantinople, whereupon Rome shed her orientalism with great ease and to a certain degree went back to paganism.

Inside of two hundred years the oriental cults had left Rome; Christianity had prevailed over Isis and Mithras, and that too in

spite of the fact that the national religion (and that meant the Roman government) made common cause with the oriental cults against it. What is the reason for this phenomenon? Christianity overcame neo-Platonism, the last powerful philosophical cult, because it had two definite things which neo-Platonism had not: (1) a well-founded organization; (2) a well-defined body of dogma. The cult of Mithras on the other hand was the supreme oriental cult; it was well organized and had a well-defined doctrine. But Christianity triumphed over it because the Christian concept of a personal God appealed more to the world than the concept in the cult of Mithras, and because the Christian idea of raising the down-trodden was a very vital thing, and appealed to all classes of people. St. Augustine is an example of a man who passed through neo-Platonism and Mithraism into Christianity, and the very reason that converted him to Christianity was what alienated the German philosopher Nietzsche from it.

The later lectures traced the development of Christianity in the Roman world as the church began to take on political and temporal power, and as the old civilization was transformed by the successive barbarian invasions. The work of monasticism was sketched and emphasis laid on its great services to learning. The lectures closed with the end of the mediaeval period.